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ABSTRACT

This article suggests one way of categorizing types of factual writing and introduces a teaching strategy for developing students' awareness of structural and language features of many factual genres. It is based on genre theory and the idea that generic structures of texts are determined by the purpose of the text. Six nonfiction genres are identified: recount, report, procedure, explanation, persuasion, and discussion. Like the prompting of dialogue in speech, young writing students benefit from prompting by their instructors in the writing process. Two models are suggested for writing instruction, including the steps: (1) demonstration (teacher modeling); (2) joint activity (collaborative writing); (3) scaffolded activity (supported writing, in one model only); and (4) independent activity (independent writing). Writing frames are also suggested as particularly useful for average writers and those with writing difficulties, and they constitute a basic outline given to students to guide their nonfiction writing. (Contains 18 references.) (EF)

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An Approach to Factual Writing.

by David Wray and Maureen Lewis

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An Approach to Factual Writing

An invited article

David Wray
Maureen Lewis

Note: After reading this article, please visit the transcript of the discussion forum to view readers' comments.

This article draws upon research work sponsored by the Nuffield Foundation. It is adapted from an article in the May 1997 issue of *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, Vol. 20, No. 2, published by the Australian Literacy Educators' Association.

Introduction

Our literate society demands that we read and write a wide range of texts. It is an observable fact that many of the texts we, as adult members of society, encounter everyday and need to deal with are nonfiction texts. Much of the research of the last few decades into the development of children's writing has tended to concentrate on personal and fictional texts; nonfiction writing often has been neglected.

The increasing demand that children read and respond to all kinds of writing (Department of Education and Science, 1990) means that we need to look closely at how we can help students become aware, and develop into competent writers, of differing nonfiction text.

Our work with teachers as part of the Exeter Extending Literacy (EXEL) Project (see, for example, Lewis, Wray, & Rospigliosi, 1994) has made it clear to us that extending interactions with nonfiction texts is an area of current concern among many classroom practicioners and that widening the range and quality of children's nonfiction writing is part of this concern.

In this article we suggest one way of categorizing types of factual writing and introduce a teaching strategy which can develop students' awareness of the structural and language features of a number of factual genres. The article consists of a number of sections, listed below, and readers might simply read these in the order suggested. However, the article also has been written as a hypertext, and readers might choose several alternative paths through it.

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Genre Theory: New Insights, New Approaches

Interest recently has increased in encouraging students to write for a particular purpose, for a known audience, and in an appropriate form. However, what constitutes an appropriate form is often dealt with in very general terms such as the listing of different types of texts, for example, "notes, letters, instructions, stories, and poems in order to plan, inform, explain, entertain, and express attitudes or emotions" (England Department of Education and Science, 1990).

This listing of text types implies that teachers and students know what distinguishes the form of one text type from another. At a certain level, of course, this is true -- for example, we all know what a story is like and how it differs from a recipe. Most of us are aware that a narrative usually has a beginning, a series of events, and an ending, and that many teachers discuss such ideas with their students. It is still relatively rare, however, for teachers of elementary students to discuss nonfiction texts by drawing on students' knowledge of the usual structure of a particular text type to improve their writing in that form.

It has been argued (Martin, 1985) that our implicit knowledge of text types and their forms is quite extensive and that one of the teacher's roles is to make this implicit knowledge explicit. Theorists in this area are often loosely referred to as "genre theorists" and they base their work on a functional approach to language, arguing that we develop language to satisfy our needs in society (Halliday, 1985). These theorists see all texts, written and spoken, as being "produced in a response to, and out of, particular social situations and their specific structures" (Kress & Knapp, 1992, p. 5). They therefore put stress on the social and cultural factors that form a text as well as on its linguistic features. They see a text as a social object and the making of a text as a social process, and they argue that in any society there are certain types of text -- both written and spoken -- of a particular form because there are similar social encounters, situations, and events which recur constantly within that society. As these events are repeated over and over again certain types of text are created over and over again. These texts become recognised in a society by its members, and once recognised they become conventionalised, that is, they become distinct genres.

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Purpose and Genre

It has been argued (Kress & Knapp, 1992) that the generic structures of texts are determined by the purposes of these texts. What does this idea actually mean?

Let us take a text type with which we are all familiar, instructions (or the procedural genre). The purpose of procedural texts is to tell someone how to do something, as in recipes and instruction leaflets. This purpose gives rise to the particular form of procedural texts -- they have to make clear what it is you are doing or making, what materials you need to achieve this aim, and the steps you need to take to reach a successful conclusion. It would not make it easier to achieve the purpose if, for example, the instructions were given first, then you were told the list of materials you needed at the end of the instructions, and finally you were told what it was you were making. The schematic structure of a procedural text helps achieve its purpose. It typically consists of the following steps:

- goal
- materials
- steps to achieve the goal (usually in temporal sequence)

You will be aware of such a structure in recipes and other instructional texts. You may not have been explicitly aware of this structure, but if you examine procedural (how to) texts, you will see that on the whole they follow the pattern outlined above. You will also be using a similar generic structure when you give any spoken instructions. If you imagine giving instructions to a class at the beginning of a session, you might say something like this:

1. Today we're going to finish writing our stories, (goal)
2. so you'll need your jotters, pencils, line guides, and best paper. (materials)
3. When you've got those sorted out, get on and see if you can finish your first draft. Then you can share it with your writing partner or with me and discuss any alterations you think need to be made. Don't forget to check spelling at the end. OK, off you go. (instructions)

It is highly unlikely that you consciously planned to use, or were even aware of using, this schematic structure, but your purpose (to tell the children what to do) meant that you automatically used the appropriate structures -- using such a structure came naturally. When we look at how the schematic structure of a text helps it achieve its purpose we are considering its genre.

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Written Genres in the Classroom

Different theorists have categorised the types of written genres we commonly use in the classroom in different ways. Collerson (1988) suggests a separation into Early genres (labels, observational comment, recount, and narratives) and Factual genres (procedural, reports, explanations, and arguments or exposition). Wing Jan (1991) categorises writing into Factual genres (reports, explanations, procedures, persuasive writing, interviews, surveys, descriptions, biographies, recounts, and narrative information) and Fictional genres (traditional fiction and contemporary modern fiction).

There is, however, a large measure of agreement as to what the main nonfiction genres are, and during our classroom work with teachers we have taken as our model the categories of nonfiction genres identified by the Sydney linguists (Martin & Rothery, 1980). As part of the work of this group, nonfiction texts were collected and analysed, including many examples of students' school scripts. From this they identified six important nonfiction genres which we use in our culture and discovered that in school one of these genres was overwhelmingly predominant.

The six main types of nonfiction genre they identified were:

1. recount
2. report
3. procedure
4. explanation
5. persuasion
6. discussion

Each of these genres has its own distinctive text structure and language features. A fuller description of each of these genres of factual textÝcan be gained by clicking on their names.

It was found that, of these six genres, recount was overwhelmingly the most widely experienced by students in school. Students spend a lot of time telling the story of what they did or found out.

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The Language of Power

Imagine you are the inspector appointed to review the proposed route of a new road and you have invited written evidence. You receive a great many letters from the general public, all wishing to put forward arguments in favour of or against the road. Some letters make their case clearly -- arguing a point, elaborating on it before moving onto another point, and ending with a summary. Others, although obviously deeply felt, are rambling, move randomly from point to point, are at times incoherent, and leave you with no clear idea of the arguments being expressed or the evidence to support them. Which letters are you more likely to consider when making your decision?

This imaginary situation is just one example of how important being competent in the use of nonfiction written genres is in our society. Persuasion, explanation, report, and discussion are powerful forms of language that we use to get things done. These forms have been called the language of power, and it can be argued that students who leave our classrooms unable to operate successfully within these powerful genres are denied access to becoming fully functioning members of society. This fact suggests that it is not sufficient for us simply to accept the overwhelming dominance of recounts in our students' nonfiction writing. We have to do something about broadening their range.

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The Problems of Writing Nonfiction

A major problem which students, especially elementary-level students, have with writing in a range of factual genres is simple inexperience. Overwhelmingly, they get the most practice at writing recounts and may get no practice at all writing in other genres.

Insufficient experience with a range of genres is, however, only one of the difficulties students face in writing nonfiction texts. They are sometimes unsure about the differences between speech and written language. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) point out the supportive, prompting nature of conversation, for example "turn taking" when someone speaks, which prompts someone else to say something. This reciprocal prompting is missing from the interaction between a writer and blank sheet of paper. Bereiter and Scardamalia's research has shown that a teacher's oral promptings during writing can extend a student's written work, with no decrease in quality. The prompts act as an "external trigger of discourse production" (1985, p. 97), and Bereiter and Scardamalia suggest that students need to "acquire a functional substitute for...an encouraging listener."

Other problems often mentioned in connection with students' reading and writing of nonfiction text are the complexity of the cohesive ties they have to recognise and use, the use of more formal registers, and the use of technical vocabulary (Anderson & Armbruster, 1981; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Perera, 1984).

In an attempt to provide a solution to all of these problems, we have been exploring the potential of *writing frames*.

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An Approach to Helping Students

Vygotsky proposed the notion that children first experience a particular cognitive activity in collaboration with expert practitioners. The child is a spectator as the majority of the cognitive work is done by the expert (usually a parent or a teacher), then a novice as he or she starts to take over some of the work under the close supervision of the expert. As the child grows in experience and capability of performing the task, the expert passes over greater and greater responsibility but still acts as a guide, assisting the child at problematic points. Eventually, the child assumes full responsibility for the task with the expert still present in the role of a supportive audience. This model fits what is known theoretically about teaching and learning. It is also a model which is familiar to teachers who have adopted such teaching strategies as paired reading and an apprenticeship approach. An adaptation of this model to the teaching of writing gives a three-part model according to which teaching proceeds from teacher demonstration of writing, to teacher and child collaborating, and then to the child writing independently.

In busy, overpopulated classrooms, however, it can be difficult to use this model as a guide to practical teaching action because it is constructed around an ideal of a child and an expert working together on a one-to-one basis, which is rarely feasible. In particular, students too often are expected to move into the independent writing phase before they are really ready; often the pressure to do so is based on the practical problem of teachers being unable to find the time to spend with them in individual support. What is clearly needed is something to span the joint-activity and independent-activity phase.

We have called this additional phase the scaffolded phase -- a phase where we offer our students strategies to aid writing but they can use without an adult being alongside them. A revised four-part model adds in a scaffolding phase to the teaching process.

At the scaffolded phase, strategies include those that can be used by students without the teacher being alongside them. One such strategy that we have been exploring is *writing frames.*

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An Apprenticeship Model of Teaching Writing

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1. Demonstration (teacher modelling)

2. Joint activity (collaborative writing)

3. Independent activity (independent writing)

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A Revised Apprenticeship Model of Teaching Writing

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1. Demonstration (teacher modelling)

2. Joint activity (collaborative writing)

3. Scaffolded activity (supported writing)

4. Independent activity (independent writing)

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What Is a Writing Frame?

A writing frame consists of a skeleton outline given to students to scaffold their nonfiction writing. The skeleton framework consists of different key words or phrases, according to the particular generic form. The template of starters, connectives, and sentence modifiers that constitute a writing frame gives students a structure within which they can concentrate on communicating what they want to say while it scaffolds them in the use of a particular generic form. By using the form students become increasingly familiar with it.

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How Writing Frames Can Help

The work of Cairney (1990) on *story frames* and Cudd and Roberts (1989) on *expository paragraph frames* first suggested to us that children's early attempts at written structures might be scaffolded profitably. Cairney describes story frames as "a form of probed text recall" and a "story level cloze." Cudd and Roberts claim that expository frames "provide a bridge which helps ease the transition from narrative to content area reading and writing." Cudd and Roberts's frames, however, were largely in recount genre and we wanted to introduce students to a wider range of genres. As a result, we have developed a range of writing frames for use in the classroom.

These frames were all developed in collaboration with teachers and have been widely used with children throughout the elementary- and middle-school years and across the full range of abilities, including students with special needs. On the strength of this extensive trialling we are reasonably confident in saying that not only do writing frames help students become familiar with unfamiliar genres, but that they also help students overcome many of the other problems often associated with nonfiction writing.

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How Writing Frames Might Be Used

The use of a frame should always begin with discussion and teacher modelling before moving on to joint construction (teacher and students together) and then to the student undertaking writing supported by the frame. This oral, teacher-modelling, joint-construction pattern of teaching is vital, for it not only models the generic form and teaches the words that signal connections and transitions, but it also provides opportunities for developing students' oral language and their thinking. Some students, especially those with learning difficulties, may need many oral sessions and sessions in which their teacher acts as a scribe before they are ready to attempt their own framed writing.

It would be useful for teachers to make big versions of the frames for use in these teacher-modelling and joint-construction phases. These large frames can be used for shared writing. It is important that the child and the teacher understand that the frame is a supportive draft and that words may be crossed out or substituted. Extra sentences may be added or surplus starters crossed out. The frame should be treated as a flexible aid, not a rigid form.

We are convinced that writing in a range of genres is most effective if it is located in meaningful experiences. The concept of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) suggests that learning is always context dependent. For this reason, we have always used the frames within class topic work rather than in isolated study-skills lessons (Lewis & Wray, 1995). British primary-school teaching is still largely based on this model of curriculum planning, and we would argue very strongly for its potential effectiveness.

We do not advocate using the frames for the direct teaching of generic structures in skills-centred lessons. The frame itself is never a purpose for writing. There is much debate about the appropriateness of the direct teaching of generic forms (Barrs, 1991/92; Cairney, 1992) and we share many of the reservations expressed by such commentators. Our use of a writing frame has always arisen from students' having a purpose for undertaking some writing. The appropriate frame was then introduced if the students needed extra help.

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Who Are Writing Frames Useful For?

We have found writing frames helpful to students of all ages and all abilities (and, indeed, their wide applicability is one of their most positive features). They have been used with students from ages 5 to 16. However, teachers have found the frames particularly useful with students of average writing ability, with those who find writing difficult, and with students who have special needs in literacy. Teachers have commented on the improved quality (and quantity) of writing that has resulted from using the frames with these students.

It would, of course, be unnecessary to use a frame with writers already confident and fluent in a particular genre, but they can be used to introduce such writers to new genres. Teachers have noted an initial dip in the quality of the writing when comparing the framed new-genre writing with the fluent recount writing of an able child. What they have discovered later, however, is that, after only one or two uses of a frame, fluent language users add the genre and its language features into their repertoires and, without using a frame, produce fluent writing of high quality in the genre.

The aim with all students is for them to reach this stage of assimilating the generic structures and language features into their writing repertoires. Use of writing frames should be focused on particular children or small groups of students, as and when they need them. They are not intended as class worksheets, for within any class there will always be students who do not need them.

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